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DEPARTMENT FOR ECA/A/E RLSWENSON; ECA/A/E/NEA DAIVES, LTALAMI;
NEA/PPD WDOUGLAS, PAGNEW; NEA/ELA

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SY](#) [XF](#) [OEXC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: ECA DECISION REQUESTED ON OPTIONS FOR CONTINUATION OF
FULBRIGHT U.S. STUDENT PROGRAM IN SYRIA

¶1. THIS IS AN ACTION REQUEST FOR ECA: PLEASE SEE PARAGRAPH 12.

¶2. [SBU] SUMMARY: The SARG has refused to regularize the 2007-2008 Fulbright U.S. student program in Syria, despite significant pressure brought to bear by Post. American Fulbright students remain in Syria on tourist visas and subject to the whims of Syrian immigration officials. Recent developments highlight the uncertain status of this program. Post seeks a decision from ECA on whether to continue the program in the current environment or to pull out the eight remaining students before the end of their grant periods in September and December 2008. Post recommends the former approach but notes this places the students at the mercy of the SARG. END SUMMARY.

Timeline of Events

¶3. [U] Between March 2007 and February 2008, Post sent six diplomatic notes to request permission for the ten 2007-2008 students to register at Damascus University and apply for residency permits. The diplomatic notes were accompanied by the Charg's direct personal intervention by phone and in person on behalf of the Fulbright program, both with MFA officials and with the Deputy Minister of Higher Education.

¶4. [U] The SARG did not respond to Post's request until an April 2008 diplomatic note from the MFA. This note stated that it was too late in the academic year for students to register at Damascus University. The MFA's response did not require the students to leave Syria.

¶5. [SBU] In the meantime, the students have been able to remain in Syria on temporary extensions of their tourist visas, or new tourist visas obtained from the Syrian Embassy in Washington, DC. Two students have already completed their grants and departed Syria permanently. Post has kept the students informed of their situation. At a May 14 meeting, the A/DCM warned them against unnecessary travel and made clear the limits of the Embassy's ability to assist when problems arise with immigration authorities.

Trouble at the Borders

¶6. [SBU] Despite the seeming non-objection of Syrian authorities to the Fulbright students' continued presence in Syria, the students have encountered problems when trying to reenter the country after trips abroad. On May 2, 2008, immigration authorities at Damascus International Airport initially refused re-entry to a Fulbright student who inadvertently arrived back in the country on the expiration date of her extended visa. She was allowed to enter on an exceptional basis by the MFA.

¶7. [SBU] On May 18, 2008, a student with just a week left of his

grant was denied re-entry from Jordan to Syria despite possessing a valid six-month, multiple entry visa. He was told his name was on a list of foreign students who would not be allowed to re-enter Syria.

Unable to return to Syria, he flew back to the States from Amman on May 22. (Note: Post was unable to confirm the existence of such a list. End note.)

¶18. [SBU] Since the May 18 incident, another Fulbright student has left the country and re-entered, two students extended their tourist visas in Syria, and two students have received new tourist visas from the Syrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., all without incident.

Options

¶19. [SBU] Post proposes two options to address the problems encountered to date:

-- Option 1: Post continues to press the SARG about ways to regularize the program and informs the SARG that the students will continue their research grants on tourist visas until the SARG regularizes the program. Post reiterates to the students the risk of being denied re-entry should they depart Syria for any reason and stresses the inability of the Embassy to intervene on their behalf with regard to immigration matters; and reminds them that other problems may arise vis-à-vis the Syrian government.

-- Option 2: Post informs the SARG that because the SARG has not regularized this part of the Fulbright program, the USG will end the program of the eight remaining U.S. Fulbright students.

Given that the students do not face harassment from the Syrian authorities and are successfully pursuing their research goals, Post

recommends option one, but notes this will place the students continued stay in Syria entirely at the whim of Syrian authorities. Recent developments have shown the Embassy no longer has the ability to resolve immigration matters with the SARG on behalf of Fulbright students. In addition, while we do not expect serious problems to arise with Syrian authorities as long as the students remain within Syria, the Embassy's ability to assist students if they do face harassment would be equal to its ability to assist any American tourist in Syria. For example, the SARG does not provide consular notification of arrests of American citizens, and Embassy consular access to Amcit prisoners is not generally granted.

Status of the Program in 2008-2009

¶10. [SBU] Given the constraints and frustrations experienced in 2007-2008, Post has already decided, with ECA's concurrence, to seek affiliation for the ten students identified for grants in the 2008-2009 academic year as researchers with the Ministry of Culture vice students affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education. Post has had no problem in the past obtaining residency permits for our Fulbright researchers through the Ministry of Culture. In this way, if the Ministry of Culture approves, the 2008-2009 students will be assured the right to apply for residency permits upon their arrival in Syria and will not be forced to expend time, energy, and money maintaining tourist visas. Their status as Fulbrighters in Syria will be sanctioned by the SARG and Post will have recourse should immigration status problems arise in the course of the year. Should the Ministry refuse to approve all or any of the researchers' projects and affiliation, grants will not be awarded.

COMMENT: Fulbright Foreign Student Program

¶11. [SBU] Post does not recommend a suspension of the Fulbright Foreign Student Program under which Syrians travel to the United States for MA studies. This program is a critical vehicle for the promotion of mutual understanding and encouraging the development of Syrian society through the experiences of young Syrians in the United States.

Action Request

¶12. [U] Post seeks ECA's guidance on how to proceed with the 2007-2008 U.S. Fulbright student program in Syria as soon as possible.

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